

Mark Williams, John Teasdale, Zindel Segel, and Jon Kabat-Zinn (2007) The Mindful Way Through Depression: Freeing yourself from chronic unhappiness, Guilford Press: New York

Chapter 4

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Dealing with the wandering mind

Katrina was becoming discouraged. She had hoped that the breathing meditation would bring her peace and quiet and escape from a busy mind, yet it didn't turn out like that. "I've been thinking of 1001 other things," she reported. "It's very difficult to stop myself from going into the future, thinking about things. I try to control it, and maybe it works for 2 min, but then I go off again."

Katrina ended up in a battle for control of the mind, one of the most common early reactions to meditation practice. Letting go of our attachment to the habit-driven *doing* mode of mind can feel both unfamiliar and artificial. We are so used to the speed and busyness of our lives that when we deliberately slow things down and give ourselves just one thing to focus on, something in us rebels. When we begin a period of formal practice, either lying down or sitting, sooner or later – usually sooner – we discover that our mind has a life of its own and that, regardless of our determination to keep it focused on the breath or any other object, it will wander away into various thoughts, often about the future or the past.

The tendency of the mind to wander is perfectly normal. The fact that our thoughts seem to proliferate without end doesn't at all reflect an inability to meditate on our part, even though it can be somewhat demoralising at first to discover this attribute of our own mind. In fact, this recognition of the ever-changing nature of our own thought stream and how labile our attention is, marks the beginning of meditative awareness. All the same, it is very easy to become fidgety in the face of the unrelenting torrent of thoughts, and think that we must be doing something wrong. We might wind up telling ourselves that nothing useful or interesting seems to be happening; the mind is just wandering uncontrollably, even as we persist in bringing it back over and over again to a sense of the breath moving in the body, or whatever our primary focus of attention may be. "How boring," the mind says to itself.

It's only natural to think that the work of meditation is being interrupted when the mind wanders here, there, and everywhere. Yet it is actually at this point that the meditation practice becomes really interesting and vital. Each moment in which the mind takes off gives us one more opportunity to become more aware of when we are slipping (or have already slipped) out of being mode and back into the doing mode. It allows us to become more aware of the thoughts, feelings, and body sensations that carry us away in those moments. Happily, such occasions happened so often that we will have countless opportunities to witness the seething pressure of the doing mind, perhaps, perceiving it with greater clarity than ever before, uncomfortable as that may sometimes be. These occasions provide us, crucially, with valuable opportunities to cultivate the skills of releasing ourselves from the *doing* mode and returning to the more mindful *being* mode.

... In that very moment, it can be helpful to note briefly what is in our mind and name what is going on (for example, "thinking, thinking," or "planning, planning," or "worrying, worrying"). Whatever the content of the thought or impulse, the task is the same: to note what is in our mind in this moment and then to gently escort our awareness back to our breathing, renewing our contact with the in-breath or the out-breath, whichever is happening when we come back.

At this point, we may find ourselves judging our experience quite harshly because we may feel so frustrated or thwarted in our efforts. *Why can't I do this better?* we may say to ourselves. In such moments, it helps if we can remember to bring a quality of kindness even to this awareness, seeing that these self-critical and judgemental thoughts and feelings are just more thoughts and feelings, like any others, just old and ingrained weather patterns in the mind and of no particular import or significance. Nor are they accurate. But their presence can be seen as providing multiple opportunities and reminders for us to bring patience, gentle acceptance, and openness to our experience. And why not do so since our experience is already as it is? Being harsh with ourselves because we don't like how it is, is adding something extra and is unnecessary. Our judging, if not held in awareness in this way, may be exactly what is preventing us from seeing clearly in this moment and from being okay with things as they are.

Turning discovery into expectations

Just like anything else, meditation can all too easily be taken on in a *doing* mode of mind. Perhaps having experienced the turbulence of the mind abating a bit on its own on a few occasions, we may find ourselves expecting it to happen every time we sit down to meditate. If the time comes when we don't feel so settled, we might be disappointed and frustrated. At some level we may note that putting aside our expectations could be much more effective, yet we can't help asking ourselves, *if we experienced calmness last time, why not now?* Unwittingly, we have slipped into becoming goal-oriented in the meditation practice. Then we may wind up feeling even more strongly that we aren't making any headway with all this meditation practice, that we are right back at square one.

"Sometimes I can get really irritated with it," said Paula. "I do my meditation when I come home from work. I usually feel very positive about the whole thing, but sometimes I can get so restless, you know, I can get really irritated."

What is actually going on with Paula? Well, first, there is the restlessness itself. This is a bundle of body sensations accompanied by an internal "feeling." But then along comes something else, something extra: irritation. How had she handled this when it came up? "I tried just to let it be and do what we were doing – just coming back to the breath. Part of it was good, you know. But then I started feeling restless and irritated again."

Irritation is closely associated with frustration, and frustration arises when an expectation or goal is thwarted. Where had Paula's goal come from?

"Parts of it just felt wonderful," she said of the practice. "I could get it in snatches, as if I was really here, and then at other times, I could feel the irritation."

Without realising it, Paula had set a goal of "feeling good" while doing the practice. It's very common to have a feeling that we've "got it" in certain moments, that "this" must be what I'm really supposed to be feeling, only to feel at other moments like we've "lost it," may be even in the very next moment. This too is a very common experience when beginning a meditation practice, and not a problem at all, especially if we can be aware of it and smile inwardly at the un-ending antics of our own *doing* mind. But once we have a sense of peace, even for the briefest of moments during a session of practice, the doing mind's habitual tendency to look for goals naturally kicks in and generates the expectation or hope that we will have the same experience in the next moment or the next time we do the practice. And if that experience doesn't repeat itself according to our expectations, how easily we can feel disappointment and irritation. And even if we recognise the expectation and the irritation, we can still easily feel critical of ourselves for getting irritated. The gyrations of the judging mind are truly endless, and so off-base from simply accepting things as they

are. We may even wind up thinking that experienced meditators never feel irritated, as we generate endless fantasies and idealisations about meditation.

So, if irritation arises in any moment, it may be helpful not to take the route of judgement and fantasy, but rather simply note it as "irritation," labelling it as a way of acknowledging it for what it is. Then we can gently. Redirect our attention back to the breath.

Our expectations of "what we ought to be feeling" will habitually and automatically rear their old, familiar heads and, on occasion, in our unawareness, cause us to feel frustrated. The challenge in such moments is simply to note the "coulda, woulda, shoulda, oughta" thoughts with friendly interest as old acquaintances. We can simply recognise them as "thinking" or "judging" or "berating" and return our attention to the breath.

Over time these goal-driven mind states will become more familiar and less of an enemy or an obstacle. Although the sense of struggle can come back with exasperating regularity, gradually our recognition of such antics becomes more of a friendly reminder of just how much power that *doing* mode exerts over our lives, and even our thoughts and feelings and motivations. Rather than a reason to despair, however, such goal-driven and judgemental mind states can be treated as cues, reminding us of how easy it is to get caught in difficult emotions around "getting somewhere." Or "making progress." This is how we eventually learn to view our thoughts and feelings as just thoughts and feelings... And come to see that they are usually neither particularly accurate nor helpful.

Accepting mind wandering and starting over.

When practising mindfulness, if we slip back into the *doing* mind-set, thinking that the meditation is "not working" or that we are "doing it wrong," it can be very helpful to remind ourselves that cultivating mindfulness of breathing, or any other object of attention, is fundamentally a practice of beginning again, and again, and again each time we are caught up and carried away by the wanderings of the mind.